A volunteer plays the piano in the lobby at McKay-Dee Hospital while a visitor looks on.

A medical student contemplates the healing power of music

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By Samuel Whittier, a fourth-year medical student at the University of Utah and former Intermountain caregiver

Samuel Whittier

Prior to medical school, I worked at McKay-Dee Hospital as a patient transporter. I recall taking many patients throughout all floors of the hospital. Assisting them and getting to know them was a great experience. During my employment at McKay-Dee, I never took the time to experience the therapeutic effects of the piano lobby, either by myself or with the patients I had the opportunity to transport. Music played a large role in my youth and early adulthood. Consequently, I've been curious of its healing attributes and altering effects upon one's state of mind.

I recently visited McKay-Dee Hospital on multiple occasions to observe the effects of the piano lobby on patients, and I made notes of my experiences along with a few thoughts and excerpts from supportive literature.

The piano lobby at McKay-Dee Hospital

Here are some of my observations of McKay-Dee's piano lobby and its effects:

> Gazing up at the impressive architecture of the four stories above me, I could see the obtuse angled glass of the main entrance to the hospital. A massive chandelier, composed of amber-colored medication bottles of various sizes hung two-thirds the way down the four-story vaulted ceiling, a fitting spectacle of such an environment. The soothing tune of Claude Debussy's *Clair de Lune* was being played by a gentle-looking woman, a task that seemed almost effortless to her. I wasn't the only one enjoying the natural reverb that caused the notes of each song to resonate through the lobby. I noticed many patients and visitors took time to either

pause in their passing or sit and listen for a moment. The presence of the softly played, classical piano pieces was a drawing influence.

I perceived patients and visitors frequenting the lobby in varying numbers, depending on whether a pianist was present. While the piano was played, anywhere from five to 15 people were present, mostly sitting in the comfortable chairs of the lobby. Within minutes after the piano playing ceased, the patients and patrons shuffled out, and often only I remained in the lobby.

I witnessed the sense of comfort patients seemed to exude while the piano was played. I observed patients closing their eyes, laying their heads back to rest on the chairs in which they were seated. Patients seemed to smile more with a musical background. Some had the help of hospital staff assisting them into the lobby to enjoy the live music. Each time I witnessed this pattern, I noticed an expression of escape and calmness on the faces of the patients. And just like clockwork, within approximately 10 minutes of the end of the piano playing, patients would make their way back to their rooms, and once again the piano lobby would become empty and quiet. I was mindful of how I felt while sitting in the quiet lobby compared to when the resonating sounds of the piano echoed through the vaulted room. Similar to my observations of the patients and their visitors, I felt a sense of calmness and tranquility while the soft tones of the classical piano pieces were professionally perf ormed.

There have been several investigations into the therapeutic effects of music on healing. Here are three examples:

Catherine Ulbricht, author of *Music Therapy for Health and Wellness,* says classical music can have a calming and relaxing effect on our state of mind. In addition, she says, "Music may achieve its therapeutic effects in part by elevating the pain threshold." Ulbricht describes positive results in treating autism, depression, dementia, sleep quality, and infant development with music therapy.

Jane Brewer, author of *Healing Sounds*, says people are sensitive and receptive to sound and its vibrations in ways few have considered. She describes cases in which patients had pivotal shifts in their recovery following music therapy.

Amy Novotney, author of *Music and Medicine*, says music treatment can influence premature babies in the NICU. Lullabies, ocean sounds, and drum machines that mimic the sound of a heartbeat have all been shown to be effective in slowing babies' heart rates, improving sucking behaviors, and enhancing sleep.

Click to hear a StoryCorps story from two Intermountain volunteers who play the piano at McKay-Dee

Jerry Harrop and Lowell Harrop are brothers who serve as volunteers at McKay-Dee Hospital. For many years, they — along with other pianists — have shared their musical talents by playing beautiful music on the grand piano in the four-story hospital lobby. Hear their story at intermountainhealthcare.org/storycorps.

When planning my observation at McKay-Dee, I anticipated simply watching the patients and visitors. I didn't expect to be drawn into the experience just like the people I was observing. I left the hospital feeling relaxed and calm — even refreshed. Over the years, many talented volunteers have donated their time to play the piano to provide soothing accompaniment. Ultimately, the benefits and healing effects of the piano lobby can easily be discerned as one visits this unique feature of an institution dedicated to excellence in healing.

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